

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
#129**

**ERWIN CIHACK
ARMY AIR CORPS PILOT**

**INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 4, 1983
BY MIKE SLACKMAN**

TRANSCRIBED BY:

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL
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Mike Slackman (MS): Today is December 4, 1983, and this is Mike Slackman and I'm going to be interviewing Mr. Erwin Cihack, a survivor of the Pearl Harbor attack. The interview is taking place at the USS *Arizona* Memorial Visitors' Center. Mr. Cihack, would you briefly tell us about your experiences on December 7, 1941, starting with your departure in B-17s from the Mainland?

Erwin Cihack (EC): Well, the whole episode started when we were informed by our C.O. [commanding officer] that we were to reinforce McArthur's air force in Clark Fields in the Philippines.

MS: Can I interrupt you here?

EC: Yes.

MS: What unit were you in at that...?

EC: I was with the 19th Bomb Group and 38th Reconnaissance Squadron.

MS: And who was your C.O.?

EC: Our C.O. is Major Truman H. Landon, who later became a three-star general. He informed us that we would be taking off from Hamilton Field in California, San Francisco. We were to get our new aircraft, B-17, these at the Sacramento Air Base and then proceed from Hamilton.

So happened on the night of December 6 at approximately six o'clock, where General Arnold, who then was the chief of what was then called the U.S. Army Air Corps, he arrived with General FICKLE, a World War I pilot, and informed us of the gravity of the situation. And he warned us not to fly over any Jap-_____ island for the simple reason that the Nomura—and that is the ambassador _____ from Japan who ceased negotiating with the State Department but were

going to submit the final demand notation which was to be delivered at one o'clock, Eastern Time on the morning of December 7, [1941].

So at approximately six o'clock, we were briefed as to the...

MS: Is this six a.m. or six p.m.?

EC: Six p.m., as to the situation relative to our relationship. And he said it was very grave. He says, his exact words were, "You are going to run into trouble."

He didn't specify where or when. How much General Arnold at that time knew, naturally, was not revealed. But he had an inkling as to what was coming because in reality, Colonel BRIT-AIN, who was then in the signal corps and in the general, that is the G-2 section of the army, was almost certain that the raid would take place one week prior to

December 7. Now, I can't remember if it was November 30 or 29, whatever. And they were ready for it then.

At any rate, after our take-off of course, we were informed, before we left, he informed us, which we already knew...

MS: What time did you take off?

EC: We took off, our first take-off was 9:30, since the C.O. was the first plane, we left first, 9:30.

MS: This is 9:30 a.m.?

EC: Nine-thirty p.m., December 6.

MS: California time?

EC: Yes. Western Coast time. In other words, this was just about two, three hours after the general had spoken to us.

MS: I'd like to ask you a few questions about the preparations and the equipment of the planes. First of all, did you have any defensive armament?

EC: We did not have any guns in place. I was just beginning to say that we were instructed to proceed to the Hawaiian Air Depot, where we would drop our bomb bay tanks. Now, in those days it was impossible to fly from, say, the Mainland to Hawaii, because our range was approximately 1600 to 1800 miles, and the flight being about 2400, 2500 miles, we were then depending on two 275-gallon bomb bay tanks. And this was our gas reserve. But since it was not practical to have a bomb rack with a bomb in that area, well naturally it would be foolish to take that heavy load over, but we needed the gas to get here. We did not have our usual twin fifties, which of course would be the top turret, bottom turret, we're two fifties in the tail. Plus the side gunners, which were fifties and the nose gunner, which was a thirty caliber.

MS: Did you have the guns aboard at all?

EC: Had absolutely nothing except one fifty that was in
Cosmoline in a wooden crate in the back end of the airplane.
Our task then was to get outfitted at the Hawaiian Air Depot,
probably on the morning of the seventh or maybe Monday.

MS: Let me ask you, if I can, a little bit about the plane and the
crew. What model plane was it?

EC: It was a B-17E.

MS: An E?

EC: E.

MS: And do you remember who the crewmembers were?

EC: Well, yes. We had a chap by the name of Lieutenant Newton, who was the co-pilot. Lieutenant Budz was the navigator.

MS: Do you remember how to spell that name?

EC: B-U-D-Z, Budz. There was a Lieutenant Ellis, who was our communications officer, was riding as a passenger. And then we had a chap by the name of Halsey, who was a master sergeant, the crew chief. And the rest of the men, I'd have to check my records.

MS: And what was your job at that time?

EC: At that time I was riding as a bombardier but I had co-pilot qualification.

MS: What was your rank then?

EC: I was a lieutenant.

MS: Was that a second lieutenant?

EC: Second lieutenant.

MS: Okay. And about how long, about how many hours did your flight from California to Hawaii take?

EC: Well, take-off time 9:30, touchdown approximately 8:15 and I'm not sure about that. I think there was a three hour differential in time. So that would be approximately, five and three and a half, about eight and a half hour flight, eight and a half to nine hours, round figures.

MS: So when you first caught sight of Hawaii, what was the first indication that you had that conditions were not normal.

EC: First, the only thing that was not normal was to see smoke rising from an island on a Sunday. We speculated about that in that while the C.O. had made this flight a number times thought, well, they could be burning off the leaves in the sugar fields, which is normal in those days. But when we saw the aircraft, well then of course, we were still in doubt, but when we saw the, _____ moving in towards us, they changed their position and started flying towards us. There were twelve pursuit ships.

MS: Did you recognize them as Japanese?

EC: From the beginning, no. We thought they were navy, but they were too far away from us. We had about maybe a five-mile distance when we spotted 'em, 'cause they were offshore.

MS: About what position was your plane at that time?

EC: We were heading for Oahu, slightly north of Kaneohe, which, of Bellows Airfield, which is now Kaneohe. So when we did recognize them, of course they were so close to us, just maybe ten to twelve feet below our altitude, they were flying the opposite course...

MS: About what altitude were you?

EC: We were, of course, it was varying then because we were letting down, maybe 5,000 feet, 5,000, 6,000.

MS: What color were they?

EC: They were olive drab with the red meatball, Rising Sun on the wings. Zero type airplanes.

MS: So what did you, were you fired on?

EC: We expected to be attacked. As a matter of fact, the C.O. started letting down real fast to gain speed. And when the flight went by us, between the one and two engines, and of course I looked down, I saw every one of the pilots, I could see their faces. The last pilot looked up then of course, to maintain his position, he looked down immediately so that he wouldn't crack up the man in front of him. But as they zipped by, the last man then, as the gentleman in back, he pulled out and he shot a few bursts. Now I saw some tracers go by the front Plexiglas. And I didn't hear anything hit the plane.

MS: Were the Japanese planes behind you?

EC: They were behind us but the leader, the squadron leader, had made a ninety-degree turn and then the one attacker then joined the flight and continued north back to the carrier. So we continued on towards Oahu and then flew, hit the island right in the middle...

MS: About, excuse me, about how far off away from Oahu were you?

EC: When we were attacked or...

MS: Yes.

EC: ...you might say intercepted? Approximately by that time it must have been about fifteen miles.

MS: So what did your pilot do then?

EC: Then he flew over, directly over Pearl Harbor and of course, at the time of departure, we were given very strict orders not to fly over Pearl Harbor because the navy didn't like it. Of course we thought it was kind of humorous at the time because the Japs were all over the place.

MS: What did you see?

EC: But we did fly over Pearl Harbor because we were short of gas. We had to take the shortest possible route and we saw plenty of chaos down there. Some ships, the light ships that were able to generate power, steam, start moving out towards down the channel. This was prior to the torpedo attack and prior to the dive-bombers. This is strictly after the first wave had hit and the Japs had strafed all the personnel, all the personnel aboard ships, anything moving on Ford Island. They already had hit Hickam Field. And there was a few stragglers. We could see a few buzzing around.

MS: Do you remember about what time it was?

EC: This was approximately 8:10 to about 8:15 as we approached then we landed in the area of about maybe 8:20, give or take a few minutes.

MS: And where did you land?

EC: We landed at Hickam Field, went out to sea and landed.

MS: Did you make, did you land on your first pass?

EC: Second pass, second pass. We were not able to make it on the first one. I don't recall now. I think there was a plane that was either had landed or was taxiing the wrong direction and we didn't want to take a chance, so we made another pass and then get ready.

MS: And then what did you do?

EC: Then we taxied off to our right side of starboard, that was the opposite side, you would say, southeast. And we took advantage of some mangrove thicket. We figured that would be a good place to hide or keep away from the strafers. And

then of course we were concerned about the aircraft. We didn't want to lose it, but we thought we'd get it out of the general direction of where all the action was, and naturally the hangar line being the worse place to be.

And then we got out of the plane and then kind of sized up the situation to see what was happening. And there was just a little bit of a lull and then another squadron come buzzing over and start strafing. Now, we were away from the airplane...

MS: Excuse me, can I just ask you a couple more questions about your plane?

EC: Mm-hmm.

MS: When you fired on, off of Oahu, did your plane suffer any hits?

EC: I couldn't find any direct holes in the fuselage. The crew chief told us later in the barracks that he thought he saw some holes around the aileron, on the port side. He thought there was some shots that hit the aileron portion and then the structure of the plane. He thought they deflected the bullet. He thought they might be still in the airframe, but we didn't see anything in the fuselage. I think that pilot was really aiming for the engines.

But there's one other incident that I didn't recall, that I didn't relate here, which happened on the morning of the seventh, at six o'clock. You see, in those days, the *China Clipper* used to depart from Mare Island, which is, of course, in San Francisco. Now, the *China Clipper* was a fine boat, a four-engine ship that used to fly from Frisco into Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, land there. Being a fine boat, naturally it needed water. And then it would go on to maybe Midway, Wake, and I forget the rest of the itinerary, although it must

have gone to China, because that's what they called it, the *China Clipper*.

Now, at six o'clock in the morning, we sat at the *China Clipper* on our port bow, our port side. And we knew that the *China Clipper* would take off maybe like seven, seven-thirty, eight o'clock, something like that, prior, or in the evening. It did happen, it left on the sixth.

Now the C.O. who was a veteran flier and had made this trip a number of times had in the past passed up the *China Clipper* the same way we did. And only at this particular...

MS: By C.O., do you mean Major Landon?

EC: Major Landon. At this particular moment, as we were passing the *China Clipper*, and actually we were holding a straight, true course for Oahu, the *China Clipper* was deviating. In other words, it suddenly, we found that the

space between us and the plane was getting wider and he then concluded that the plane was going for Hilo, Hawaii. At the time we didn't question it. In our minds, well, we just dismissed it. But then when the raid was very evident and it was all over, then we start speculating. Why did the *Clipper* go to Hilo? Well, we know why. We knew that they had to stay out of the bombing. They never flew to Hilo. They always went over—as a matter of fact, I don't think there was any facilities in those days to receive it. Yet, when I wrote to Pan-American on this, who gave their pilot instructions, it was all classified. They wouldn't reveal it.

So yet, when we were then at maybe eighth or ninth of December, when we were then assigned permanent barracks over here on the north side of Hickam, which is right next to Pearl Harbor, here we saw the *China Clipper* coming right over the barracks and landing at Ford Island. So you know, we then were thinking about what General Arnold told us, "You're going to run into trouble."

Somebody in the operations knew that Pearl Harbor's going to get hit. Stay out of there. We don't want to lose you. That's our conclusion.

MS: Going back to December 7, after you got under the mangrove trees...

EC: Yeah.

MS: ...and after the, did you stay there for the remainder of the raid?

EC: No, we stayed there for a while, then, well let me put this in proper sequence. Then we were strafed. I don't know if they were strafing us or if they saw infantry or somebody moving with trucks, but they were strafing the area. We hit the ground a couple of times. We were gassed. The gas truck come right immediately. That was the regulation.

They had to top the tanks. We thought it was foolish to put gas in the tanks because we couldn't get any bombs, we couldn't get any—the crew chief went over the flight line and saw if he could find somebody, but couldn't find anybody to take care of us. So we didn't question that. We thought, well, the man has got his orders, we're not going to rescind it. But naturally we were curious as to what's going to happen next. I went back in the plane and got into my B-4 bag and put my sidearms, because frankly, I was looking for an invasion. We were watching the ocean. We thought we're going to see landing barges and perhaps some amphibious forces coming in, but it didn't happen.

Well at any rate, the next big, outside of the torpedo bombers coming in and hitting the battleships. We just go the tail end of that. We saw them coming in. But then I noticed three squadrons coming up, they were—which is approximately the same area between the new Hickam Field entrance and the old Hickam Field entrance, which would be

just south of the present Nimitz Gate, equal distance. This was a focal point that the squadrons decided on for their point of making their dives. And these three squadrons coming from all, three different directions, had their timing perfectly. As one went into his dive, the next one was approaching his diving point. The first one, you could see the bomb released...

MS: About how many planes were in each of these squads?

EC: Oh, there must have been at least twelve or fifteen of 'em.

MS: Mm-hmm.

EC: And then that's when the *Arizona* hit and I saw that, the magazine or whatever it was, I thought the whole damn harbor went up. It was one big tremendous roar and a flash. And then of course later on I heard that it was an armor-

piercing bomb and it had penetrated the deck and hit the magazine and then exploded the entire ship.

MS: In the flight over of your group of twelve planes from California, what kind of, were you in any kind of formation?

EC: No formation. Could not fly formation because we needed the gas reserve. We just could not afford to fly formation.

MS: In what order of takeoff was your plane?

EC: Well, I, because the major was the C.O., the leader, we were first.

MS: You were first.

EC: Nine-thirty.

MS: So...

EC: Every five minutes, there was a takeoff.

MS: Was the major aboard your plane?

EC: Oh yeah, he was my C.O. and the flyer and the pilot of my aircraft.

MS: Were you the first B-17 into Oahu?

EC: I couldn't tell you that. I suspect, from what I saw on the runway, I think we might have been the second or third. Now, we did wash down the captain's plane, Captain Swenson came in later or just a few minutes. Maybe while we were taxiing, he got hit because we didn't see it happen. All we knew is when we walked back right across the field to go to Pearl Harbor, then we went over to look at the damage, see if we could help somebody or do something, we noticed the plane was hit there.

MS: Later that day, were your B-17s sent out to scout for the Japanese fleet?

EC: No, no, no. We didn't, we couldn't go out because we didn't have anything to fight with. The C.O. thought it would be wise to wait for orders. You couldn't get any direct orders, there was too much chaos. Then it was, he was told to stay put.

MS: Stay put.

EC: So that was it. And we were rather put out about it because we thought just any kind of offense on our part would help, but it wasn't possible.

MS: Well, thank you very much. Do you have anything else?

EC: Well...

MS: You know, about your experiences that day?

EC: Well, there was some humor in the thing too. I mean, it's a tragedy like that, you can't exactly depict _____ would coincide with a comedy but the point that I'm bringing out is that after we had made our move away from the plane and some of these strafers did see us, we would, we anticipated getting strafed and we would be strafed, because sometimes they were short, sometimes they were long. Sometimes we were not the target. But we would hit the ground, and it's natural for you to try to dig a hole in the ground with your body to get away from it. So you had a mouthful of dirt and your teeth would blacken and the fellow next to you would jump up _____ and you'd laugh at 'em. And he'd say, "You look the same way," (chuckles), so that was the humor part of it.

So after the two-engine bombers then left the area, they came in from the sea and they bombed the hangar line. And their bombs hit right smack in the roofs of the hangars and they lifted the roofs and knocked out all the glass and then they formed a straight line and they went back to the carrier. So then after that...

MS: Did you say they were two-engine Japanese planes?

EC: They were two-engine bombers. That's right. Then we went back to, over to Hickam, that is to try to find that general headquarters. We went to control tower and then we went, right into Pearl Harbor. When we were told that we can't do anything, we went into Pearl Harbor and looked at the damage, walked around.

MS: How did you feel when you saw that kind of...?

EC: Very, very sad. I thought it was a tragedy. Of course at the time, I didn't know the truth about the whole story, about how Bull Halsey was sitting out there with his *Enterprise* and he had orders to stay put. That's why I want to get into the archives. I want to see exactly who gave him orders not to mix.

MS: How old were you at that time?

EC: At that time, I was exactly twenty-eight years old.

MS: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Cihack.

EC: I take it back, it was twenty-six.

MS: Twenty-six.

EC: Yes, I forgot.

END OF INTERVIEW